QUAESTIO DIVINA

Research as Spiritual Practice

Bernadette Flanagan

AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT of most programmes of postgraduate study is the closing assignment—the research, dissertation or thesis. This assignment often assumes Olympic proportions for those who have to undertake it so as to complete the award for which they are studying. The perception of thesis-writing as an enormous undertaking usually arises from the fact that it will be the longest piece of writing ever undertaken by the student. In the context of the anxiety generated by writing such a long piece of work, as well as the challenges of acquiring the technical skills that undertaking research requires, it can be difficult to integrate such a task with the content and focus of a postgraduate programme in spirituality. However a number of recent developments are changing the nature of the research experience and, as a result, the research project has the potential to become a privileged occasion of spiritual transformation for those undertaking it.

Educational Theory and Spiritual Transformation

Certain developments in contemporary educational theory echo the instructions of Ignatius of Loyola in the twenty Introductory Annotations regarding the Spiritual Exercises. In Annotation Two, Ignatius advises the director of the Exercises that 'what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savoring them interiorly' (Exx 2). Similarly, in supervising research in spirituality, the aim is to look beyond the topic, questions, methods and conclusions to the Spirit at work in drawing the student into a particular field of enquiry. New educational approaches can enable truth to be relished during the process of conducting spirituality research.

Transformative Learning

One development of the past quarter-century that is having an impact on the nature of the research experience is a movement in adult educational contexts from transmissional to transformative learning. Transmissional learning is associated with organized, teacher-directed instruction that supports a quest for information, whereas transformative learning is associated with facilitated, mentor-led processes that support the human

The Way, 53/4 (October 2014), 126–136

search for meaning. The lineage of transformative learning is commonly traced to Jack Mezirow, emeritus professor of adult and continuing education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. Transformative learning theory is preoccupied with precipitating 'deep' learning.[1] In the mid 1970s, Mezirow's interest in adult learning styles arose from his study of women returning to college after years of being wives and mothers at home. He discovered that, more than learning new information, the women developed a different way of seeing themselves and their world. Mezirow theorized that the 'disorienting dilemma' triggered by their transition back into education could be a privileged moment of transformation when facilitated with attentiveness and compassion.

John Dirkx, professor of higher, adult and lifelong education at Michigan State University, advanced Mezirow's work by developing an approach to transformative learning proposing that, 'Our journey of self-knowledge also requires that we care for and nurture the presence of soul dimension in teaching and learning'.[2] Dirkx encouraged approaches to learning that allowed underlying myths, archetypes and symbols to emerge from the unconscious so as to develop a connection with soul in the learning journey. Experiences of mystery—becoming a parent, accompanying the dying, passing through loss of health, pursing a dream or engaging in creative endeavour—open up a realm of being that is barely visible to everyday consciousness. It is this realm that is critical in both educational transformation and spiritual awakening.

Reflective Practitioners

As well as investigating themes of lived experience such as work, relationships, challenging events and creativity, spirituality research may also explore the practice of those who support the contemplative unfolding of others through prayer, pilgrimage or spiritual accompaniment. In this context, reflective practitioner theory can be a rich resource.

Reflective practitioner theory was introduced by Donald Schön in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* in 1983. Schön was professor of urban studies and education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In his view, what is important about reflection, in any field of professional practice, is that the practitioner is not just looking back on past actions and theories, but rather consciously examining personal inspiration,

[1] For 'deep' and 'surface' learning, see Ferenc Marton and Roger Säljö, 'On Qualitative Differences in Learning—II Outcome as a Function of the Learner's Conception of the Task', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46/2 (1 June 1976),

[2] John Dirkx, 'Nurturing Soul in Adult Learning', *Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice*, 74 (Summer 1997), 80.

experiences, actions and commitments, and using these to draw out new knowledge and meaning, and achieve deeper levels of insight into their practice. Thus, a person who has lived the Vincentian / de Marillac charism for many years will enrich reflection on the contemporary practice of spiritual accompaniment of those who are poor and marginalised by employing his or her unique repertoire of insights. Similarly, a person who has nurtured children from infancy to adulthood also brings a unique repertoire of insights to bear on leading groups in prayerful reflection on the maternal face of God.

Reflective practitioner research in spirituality has the capacity to enrich ministry in a distinctive and original way. Education literature emphasizes the significant role of a facilitator in supporting a transformative engagement with ministry experience. Terms such as 'animator', 'guide', 'mentor', 'host', 'catalyst' and 'co-learner' describe the varied skills needed and responsibilities undertaken by a research supervisor working within this horizon.

Contemplative Inquiry

Drawing on his experience of higher education at Columbia University, the contemporary mystic Thomas Merton wrote about his vision of education in an essay entitled 'Learning to Live'. Merton suggested that an intense educational activity such as research could, at its core, be contemplative:

> The fruit of education, whether in the university … or the monastery … [is] the activation of that innermost center, that *scintilla animae*, that 'apex' or 'spark' which is freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence, self beyond ego, a being beyond the created realm and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation.[3]

This conviction has worked itself out through recent developments in contemplative education and contemplative inquiry.[4] Mary Rose O'Reilley's book *Radical Presence* is typical of a stream of reflection on the relationship between the tasks of educators—whether in teaching or research—and the practices of spiritual companioning. *Radical Presence* asks, 'What might happen if we try to frame the central questions of our discipline as spiritual questions and to deal with them in light of our spiritual understanding?'[5]

[3] Thomas Merton, 'Learning to Live', in *Love and Living*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 3–14, here 9.

[4] See Mirabi Bush, 'Contemplative Higher Education in Contemporary Life', *Contemplation Nation: How Ancient Practices Are Changing the Way We Live*, edited by Mirabi Bush (Kalamazoo: Fetzer Institute, 2011), 221–237.

[5] Mary Rose O'Reilley, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (London: Heinemann, 1998), 3.

Education, ***from the Chittenden Memorial Window, by Louis Comfort Tiffany***

The cultivation of awakened personal presence in the setting of research supervision can have profound outcomes. When any encounter is underpinned by an active, lived presence, its impact can be of exceptionally long duration; the encounter may even reverberate during the whole of a lifetime. Contemplative inquiry also places demands on the researcher: to cultivate the practice and art of structured attentiveness to mystery in the research which is being undertaken.

Transformative, Reflective and Contemplative Research Methods

The question arises as to what types of research methods—step-by-step approaches to investigating a research question—are adequate to the vision presented by these developments. Three methods seem to offer possible answers to this question: action research, intuitive inquiry and auto-ethnography.

Action Research

Typically, action research is understood to be an investigation undertaken at a particular time in an occupation or in the life of an organization with a view to making discoveries that could improve the practice of those who are researched. This type of research activity has become attractive in recent decades as it promises to contribute to a constant improvement in the core activities of socially engaged professions (for example, education, social work, community development, journalism, health care provision) and to increase the satisfaction of everyone involved in them. The focus of a research project is determined by the hopes and reflections of professionals about the improvement and enhancement of quality in

their field of practice, and how this can be achieved by means of comprehensive data gathering and the reflective pursuit of insight from the data. Research in this framework does not seek an 'objective' truth that exists outside the world of the researcher and is disconnected from the action of everyday life. The professional practice of spiritual direction, for example, benefits from gathering convincing evidence that a particular form of intervention or practice has made a real difference in the lives of directees; and careful reflection on data gathered can generate further lines of enquiry.

In 2000, Prof. Peter Reason suggested that action research could, by virtue of its commitment to wisdom practices, itself be considered a spiritual practice. Reason's view builds on his early work on the subject of 'sacred enquiry', which emphasized the need to explore the depth experience of beauty in diverse life settings, and to place healing at the heart of encounter with the other.[6] For him, action research includes a family of step-by-step research methods—cooperative inquiry, participatory action research, appreciative inquiry—designed to produce outcomes which make the world more just, kind or compassionate and assist in enabling life to flourish (whether for individuals or communities).[7] Reason has found resonances between the aims of action research and the vision of the depth ecologist Thomas Berry, who perceived the universe as a communion of subjects and not a collection of objects. The 'Great Work' of humanity, in Berry's view, is to live from this contemplative perspective:

> No one is exempt. Each of us has our individual life pattern and responsibilities. Yet beyond these concerns each person in and through their personal work assists in the Great Work. Personal work needs to be aligned with the Great Work …. While this alignment is … difficult in these times, it must remain an ideal to be sought.[8]

Action research, for example with migrants or victims of torture concerning their appropriate spiritual care, or into the spiritual enrichment programmes delivered in elder-care centres, participates in the Great Work, and so can contribute to fulfilling the vocational calling of those who undertake such research.

[6] Peter Reason, 'Reflections on Sacred Experience and Sacred Science', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 2/3 (1993), 273–283.

[7] See Peter Reason, 'Action Research as Spiritual Practice', University of Surrey Learning Community conference, 4–5 May 2000, available at http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/AR_as_spiritual_ practice.pdf, accessed 28 August 2014.

[8] Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 7, quoted in Reason, 'Action Research', 19.

Prof. David Coghlan, from Trinity College Dublin Business School, has also argued that Ignatian spiritual reflection is an incipient form of action research.[9] He has identified how, in its essence,

> … the Ignatian approach to spirituality views God as one who is active in the world and who invites individuals and communities, a) to seek and find God in the experience of their own lives and of the world and b) to respond in action.[10]

'The Ignatian cycles of prayer and action', he continues, 'can be juxtaposed with the action research cycles of action and reflection'. Just as Ignatius of Loyola brought prayer and action together in a mutually transformative synthesis, so the contemporary action researcher explores the depths of transformative longing at work in individuals and communities so as to release that longing as an empowering gift.

Intuitive Inquiry

This is a strongly subjective research method which allows the inquirer to go beneath the surface of a phenomenon being studied to the felt experience of encounter with that phenomenon. It is particularly suitable for the study of subtle human experiences such as the effects of spending time in nature, living through a life-altering illness or becoming a parent.[11] Rosemarie Anderson, an internationally acclaimed teacher of intuitive inquiry, notes:

> … what matters to the researcher may be an ordinary experience latent with symbolic meaning: a transformative, anomalous, or peak experience; or a social or personal phenomenon that invites inquiry for reasons that only the researcher may apprehend, albeit vaguely, at the start.[12]

Intuitive inquiry is one among a broader collection of transpersonal research methods that aim to support researchers who wish to study transformative human experiences, including the spiritual dimension of such experiences.[13] These methods accept multiple ways of knowing as valid, including feelings, intuition, dreams and altered states of consciousness.

[9] David Coghlan, 'Seeing God in All Things: Ignatian Spirituality as Action Research', *The Way*, 43/1 (January 2004), 97–108.
[10] David Coghlan, 'Ignatian Spirituality as Transformational Social Science', *Action Research*, 3/1 (2005), 89–102, here 95.
[11] See Rosemarie Anderson, 'Intuitive Inquiry: An Epistemology of the Heart for Scientific Inquiry', *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 32/4 (2004), 307–341.
[12] Rosemarie Anderson, 'Intuitive Inquiry: Exploring the Mirroring Discourse of Disease', in *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry*, edited by F. J. Wertz (New York: Guilford, 2011), 243–276, here 244.
[13] See William Braud and Rosemarie Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honoring Human Experience* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998), ix.

They emerge within the context of the Harvard professor Howard Gardner's 'multiple intelligence' educational philosophy, which asserts that there are at least eight types of intelligence, all of which may be engaged in the academy.[14] While Gardner has not been a proponent of spiritual intelligence, his work has created the context within which research methods, such as intuitive inquiry, that refer specifically to the spiritual meaning embedded in everyday human experience are more widely accepted in the academy.

Within this framework, research may have a vocational character, seeking to re-search that which has already been at work in a person's own life and those of a relevant sample group. Robert Romanshyn has observed that this type of research is 'a searching again of what has already made its claim upon us and is making its claim upon the future'.[15] It is often a liberation from entombment in the dark places of personal history.

Auto-Ethnography

Ethnography is an important research approach for sociologists and anthropologists, who are interested in presenting the contours of people's lives in their ethnic, social and cultural uniqueness, with a particular focus on the everyday dimensions of life. Ethnicities, cultures or social settings that are hidden or underrepresented in scholarly investigation are of especial interest. For instance, the researcher may seek to understand the culture of places and spaces such as factories or schools, or may be interested in universal life experiences such as childhood, ageing, sexuality or death. Whatever the focus of the ethnographer, the method is marked by the intensity of the relationship between researchers and their subjects, manifest in a deep commitment to developing strategies that allow the living voice of the subjects to shape the narrative of findings.

Concomitantly, auto-ethnography is a form of self-narrative that reflects on the self within its ethnic, social and cultural identity. Heewon Chang, who is professor of educational and organizational leadership at the Loeb School of Education, Eastern University, Philadelphia, has been active in developing auto-ethnography as a method for spirituality research in the academy.[16] Such research is interested in how ethnic, social and

[14] These intelligences are: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. See Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 42–53.

[15] Robert Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind* (New Orleans: Spring Journal, 2007), 113.

[16] *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies*, edited by Heewon Chang and Drick Boyd (Walnut Creek: Left Coast, 2011).

cultural identity determines people's quest for meaning, purpose and authenticity, and their spiritual horizons in life.

Since spirituality shapes the public as well as the private self, investigations of the public living-out of personal spirituality are also of interest to the auto-ethnographer. In this latter vein, the research of Elizabeth Tisdell, professor of education at the Penn State Harrisburg Campus, has created the conditions whereby more and more 'educators and cultural workers are beginning to break the silence about the connection between spirituality and education'.[17]

Spiritual Practices and Research

Developments in contemporary educational theory and in the range of available research methods are facilitating new experiences of spiritual growth in the process of undertaking academic research. A further field of interest within this contemporary convergence between spiritual practice and research is the possibility of applying structured spiritual practices such as accompaniment to the research cycle. Kees Waaijman, emeritus professor of spirituality at the Titus Brandsma Institute in the Netherlands has been a leader in such developments, particularly through his writing on 'Methods' in the seminal, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*.[18]

For Michael O'Sullivan spirituality research requires not only practices such as spiritual accompaniment and the methods about which Waaijman writes, but also what he calls the more foundational practice of authentic self-presence. When researchers study lives, issues, situations, organizations, traditions and trends they employ a range of practices rooted in and expressive of their self-presence. These practices are, basically, attending, inquiring, judging and deciding.[19] When they function well, they are practices of spiritual solicitude in relation to what is being studied, since they enable the researcher to arrive at outcomes that give expression to his or her dynamic and normative desire for beauty, truth, goodness and love as ultimates in life. O'Sullivan calls this kind of self-transcending and foundational self-presence 'authenticity': it is receptive, relational, reflective,

[17] Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 20.
[18] Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 59–946.
[19] Bernard Lonergan gives the following list as operations: 'seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating, reflecting, marshalling and weighing the evidence, judging, deliberating, evaluating, deciding, speaking, writing'. The operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding are arrived at by denoting the various operations on the four levels of experience, understanding, judgement, and decision by the principal occurrence on each level. See his *Method in Theology* (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1990), 6.

responsible and reflexive, and nurtured by connatural lived experience. He declares that it can be verified as being correlative with objectivity. Therefore for him it is imperative, for the sake of truthful, ethical, aesthetic and loving research, that researchers devote time and effort not only to learning methods for research, but also to cultivating what he sees as the spiritual practice of raising the quality of their self-presence.[20]

In the same way, I believe that the stages of the *lectio divina* process of reflection may usefully be applied to undertaking a research project, transforming research into *quaestio divina*. While the origins of the practice of *lectio divina* may be traced to the sixth-century Rule of Saint Benedict, it was formalised as a four-step process by the Carthusian monk Guigo II in the twelfth century. It involves reading (*lectio*), reflecting (*meditatio*), seeking guidance (*oratio*) and being open to mystery (*contemplatio*).[21]

Lectio *and Literature Review*

The Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse (1815–1894) has provided very specific instructions about the reading stage of *lectio divina* that I believe are helpful when developing a literature review for a research topic:

> You have a book? Then read it, reflect on what it says, and apply the words to yourself. To apply the content to oneself is the purpose and fruit of reading. If you read without applying what is read to yourself, nothing good will come of it, and even harm may result. Theories will accumulate in the head, leading you to criticize others instead of improving your own life. So have ears and hear.[22]

The criticisms made here of mindless spiritual reading may have a wider application to research reading for a spirituality topic. Such reading can become abstract and disconnected from the lived question that is being investigated. The literature presentation becomes devoid of personal appropriation, an accumulation of theories with little wisdom being exercised in selecting that which speaks to the heart of the research question.

Meditatio *and Research Method*

The French Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) attached profound significance to the art of meditation. He developed his

[20] See, for example, Michael O'Sullivan, 'The Spirituality of Authentic Interiority and the Option for the Economically Poor', *Vinayasadhana*, 5/1 (January 2014), 62–74; and 'Reflexive and Transformative Subjectivity: Authentic Spirituality and a Journey with Incest', in *Sources of Transformation: Revitalising Christian Spirituality*, edited by Edward Howells and Peter Tyler (London: Continuum, 2010), 173–182.
[21] Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations*, translated by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981), 68–69.
[22] *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, edited by Igumen Chariton of Valamo (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 130.

reflections while acting as spiritual adviser to one of his own monks, who later became Pope Eugene III. In his five books on 'Consideration' he sets out a staged process for seeking after truth through meditation. Together with prayer, he images meditation as one of the two feet on which we proceed to discover what is not yet known:

> Let us then ascend with meditation and prayer for our two feet. Meditation teaches us what it is that we lack, and prayer obtains it. Meditation shows us the way, and prayer makes us walk therein. Finally, meditation lets us know the dangers which threaten us, and prayer makes us avoid them.[23]

The necessity of finding 'a way'—a path, route or map for the journey being undertaken—may also have a useful application to scholarly research on a spirituality topic. The discussion of the topic must avoid becoming a love letter to the researcher's pet subject. Instead, it is necessary to identify a well-structured research method from the wide variety available today, and undertake the research journey with critical awareness and integrity.

Oratio *and Research Findings*

In a Trappist reflection on prayer it is noted that in the act of prayer 'the person becomes quiet and thus open to the softer voice of God'.[24] In analyzing research findings it is essential that this quieting process can occur so that the mysterious presence in the gathered data may be received attentively. Recording research findings in spirituality requires listening for the still small voice of Spirit within the spoken words, actions and interactions of the informant. Indeed in interview-based research the quality of the data itself may be influenced by the researcher's capacity for quieting. The ability to listen while showing a personal attunement to grace at work in the world may have a powerful effect in evoking the confidence of interviewees in sharing their own most authentic perceptions of the dimension of spirituality being investigated. Reverent and attentive listening often has an enabling effect in collecting data of profound significance.[25]

Contemplatio *and Conclusions*

Contemplation may be understood as a stance of presence, not only to one's own inner sense of mystery but also to the mystery in the situation and needs of the world around us. A contemplative stance thus underlies

[23] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo in natali sancti Andrea*, 1.10, translation in Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality: In the Middle Ages* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1924), 34.
[24] James A. Jaksa, *Voices from Silence: The Trappists Speak* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1980), 13.
[25] Janet K. Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale: Spiritual Direction and Narrative* (New York: Paulist, 2011), 117.

and embraces every aspect of the research journey. Within this perspective, all the reading, reflection, attentiveness, conversation, analysis and activity involved in undertaking research can form a sense of personal encounter with God. Since research can sometimes become a routine performance—mechanical execution of another course requirement—the spirituality researcher is ultimately challenged to become less and less controlling of the conclusions of the research, and more and more committed to a contemplative stance towards the meaning of the findings which may even exceed the contours of the original question.

Epilogue

At the time when I was writing this, some students from an MA in Christian Spirituality programme at All Hallows College, Dublin, where I teach research methods, submitted their dissertations. Since what I have written derives from what I taught, I asked them if, in retrospect, they considered writing their dissertations to be a spiritual practice. Four of the students' responses may offer an incentive to further consideration of the challenges involved in developing research as a spiritual practice.

> *My research did move me beyond merely gathering information, it changed my perceived spiritual outlook.*
>
> *I had to ask myself if I really believed in what I was writing.*
>
> *I think as I now reflect on the whole process of the research I very much feel that it has taken me deeper into the area of what I was researching.*
>
> *In summary I had to make room in my heart for this research. It caused me to ponder on life and to consider what is really important for me …. It was, for me, both a journey with the experiences of others and a journey to myself. It gave me the opportunity to sort the wheat from the chaff in terms of the information and misinformation out there about the subject matter and connect with academic authors who clearly share the same passion that I do. The result seemed to be more than the sum of its parts and I was lighter as a result …. The process of engaging with a dissertation on spirituality has the power to transform the consciousness of the researcher as one cannot be distantly removed from the research, the researcher is in the dissertation and the dissertation becomes part of the researcher.*

Bernadette Flanagan is director of research at All Hallows College (Dublin City University). She has published *Embracing Solitude: Women and New Monasticism* (2013) and edited, with Michael O'Sullivan, *Spiritual Capital: Christian Spirituality in Applied Perspective* (2012).